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Legislative Battle Appears Likely

The final, most important decision affecting patients and physicians in Oklahoma could very well come during the next four or five months. The nature of the decision and how well informed the makers are may help mold the standards of health care for years to come. The issue of course will be professional liability legislation and the arena will be the State Capitol — or more specifically, the Oklahoma Legislature.

Throughout the nation, legislators, physicians and attorneys are all readying themselves for a campaign which will ultimately decide the future course of the medical profession. If meaningful decisions are successfully blocked by special interest groups, the professional liability situation will likely continue its steady, methodical deterioration. If bad laws are passed, whether well-intended or not, the situation could very easily collapse suddenly, sending thousands of physicians into other professions and leaving large regions of the country without medical care. How well we inform both our representatives in Oklahoma City and our public throughout the state could very well determine what course this important legislation takes.

For years patients and physicians in this state have been blessed with perhaps the most stable insurance program in the nation. As a result, health care costs have remained reasonable and the profession has grown. It is pure folly, however, to believe that Oklahoma can continue to prosper while the rest of the country struggles. We have already been caught up in the national crisis and the situation, if left unattended, will only worsen.

In just one year, insurance rates for Oklahoma physicians have increased by frightening percentages. Although professional liability insurance rates are still uncommonly low in this state, the hand writing is on the wall. Insurance rates will continue to escalate and the unavailability problem will steadily grow until effective steps are taken to counteract the trend and attack the basis of the problem.

Throughout the past summer and fall, the OSMA staff has carefully monitored state and national legislation which would deal with the problem. The OSMA's Council on Insurance and the Professional Liability Study Commission, have helped draft a package of bills which, if passed next session, should protect both the Oklahoma physician and his patient against unreasonable increases in health care costs and a total collapse of the insurance market which has already occurred in several other states. What ultimately happens to this package depends largely upon the kind of support which we can generate for the issue and how much input the association and its members have in the final decision making.

Doctors, it's no exaggeration to say that the next few months could determine your future, your family's and your profession's. The OSMA staff and its leadership have spent many hours developing our legislative package and explaining it to leaders of the House and Senate. Now, it is important that we all get behind it and push for its passage. To under estimate the importance of this issue would be a terrible mistake; to under estimate the power of our adversaries would be even worse.

A grass-roots campaign would be the most effective way to fight the problem, but for it to be successful, widespread support is essential. Please help by telling your patients and your representatives how important this issue is to us *all*. If we wait much longer, it may just be too late. *Richard Hess, Director of Communications, OSMA* □